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WALTER DE LA MARE

BY ALICE LOTHIAN

THE first decade of this century was a dry season in English poetry. The full flood of Victorian verse had subsided, and the feeble trickle that survived was deflected into artificial fountains that tossed again and again in a fixed and limited arc the same few bucketfuls of water. But here and there fresh waters were springing, as inaccessible to the general reader, and as hard to trace, as the secret springs of great rivers. By 1910 Walter de la Mare had published five volumes, in prose and verse, yet few came to the well. Then followed the age of the anthologist, in which we now are. By the labors of poetry-lovers the work of contemporary poets in England and America is sought out and made known to an ever-widening circle of readers. Now recognition and maturity have come to Mr. de la Mare hand-in-hand, and readers refreshed in the first instance by the rationed sips of the anthologists, have found their way to the fountainhead.

Of one thing we may be certain: The reader who dips and sips like a water wagtail skimming over a stream will never learn the poet's secret. His will be the partial view, the ready phrase. But a living literature, like a living religion, exists that we may have life and have it more abundantly; and we cannot possess ourselves of anything worth having unless we are prepared to "launch out into the deep and let down our nets for a draught". Such work as Mr. de la Mare's was not brought to birth that it might provide a peg for a witty saying at our next literary party, nor even for articles whereby the critic may in the sweat of his brow eat bread. "Certainly that was not my mother's way" with books, comments Miss M. in *The Memoirs of a Midget*. And Henry Brocken, too, knew what authors were about when "they labored from dawn to midnight, from laborious midnight to dawn". His story, it is true, was told before Mr. Hugh Walpole had set the fashion of four hours' work a day—preferably before lunch, but on no account before breakfast.

The people of the books are not dead. So Henry Brocken believed when he set out on his journey that blue March morning, a journey without map or sign-post save the conviction that "somewhere, in immortality serene, dwelt they whom so many had spent life in dreaming of, and writing about". As for band and banner to cheer on his solitary enterprise, what more did he need than the same poem of *Tom o' Bedlam* as was to inspire the Midget years later, to answer *her* summons to life's tourney:

With a heart of furious fancies,
Whereof I am commander:
With a burning spear,
And a horse of air,
To the wilderness I wander.

With a knight of ghosts and shadows,
I summoned am to tourney:
Ten leagues beyond
The wide world's end;
Methinks it is no journey.

Henry Brocken's journey begins placidly enough—almost, indeed, unawares. He sets off as usual for his morning ride on the old mare Rosinante. But soon we see how reading, as well as writing, may be a creative, life-giving activity. For first he meets Lucy Grey wandering in the wild; then he spends a night with Jane Eyre and Mr. Rochester, in their lonely house whose air is afloat with listeners. Thence he finds his way to the Garden of the Hesperides, where he lingers for a while with Herrick's lovely ladies. Journeying on, he turns a deaf ear to the song of the Lorelei, and flees from Prince Ennui and the Sleeping Beauty's enchanted courts. Then danger comes. Gulliver's Houyhnhnms charge down upon him, and only the Yahoo's loyalty saves him from destruction. He travels on to the Inn at the World's End, where Christian's neighbors still gossip and quarrel. Leaving them behind, he comes to the shore where Annabel Lee builds sandcastles that can never be finished, unless the sea will stand still for only one day. Leaving her, and Rosinante, he rows into the night, and looks into the face of Criseyde in the Isle of Shades; and thence he journeys, on and on.

Some whom he meets would tempt him "with shelter and quiet

to give you rest, young man, and apples for thirst withal"; and some would daunt him with doubt and despair. Jane Eyre, at the very outset, would have deterred him, not from the dangers, but from the restlessness of such a journey. "I have never wandered beyond the woods," she owns, "lest I should penetrate too far." But Henry Brocken will not be held back, for "so long as Chance does not guide me back, I care not how far forward I go". And whither? There is no fixed goal, only an endless seeking inspired by the faith that "somewhere yet, Imogen's mountains lift their chill summits into heaven; over haunted sea-sands Ariel flits; at his webbed casement next the stars Faust covets youth, till the last trump ring him out of dream."

It is no restless human itch to be elsewhere that leads the trio of *The Three Mulla Mulgars* on "through forest and river, forest, swamp and river". Little Nod and lean Thimble and fat old Thumb are comfort-loving animals, urged on by simple loyalty to their father's behest. They journey through strange scenes, described with a poet's sure grasp of the salient features of a landscape. They encounter strange and awesome creatures, the lure of magic and the menace of the unknown. They meet hardship and danger and success, with pluck and loyalty and silly vanity, just like men. But although Nod becomes deeply attached to kindly, lonesome Andy Battle, the only human being in this strange and lovely tale, flesh-eating humanity is alien and evil in Mulgar eyes. Nod, like the younger son of folk-lore, is beloved of the gods, and has the power in extremity of need to summon magic by rubbing the Wonder-stone, a pebble that tingles in his hand "like courage that steals into the mind when all else is vain". And when at last, weary and travel-worn, the Mulgars drift in their rough and narrow rafts out of the dark cavern into the sunlit valley, "the long-sought, lovely Valleys of Tishnar", Nod is overcome by a sudden weariness and loneliness and sadness, and fear of the journey that has no end; for even the Promised Land, it would seem, is but a lodging for a night.

So it ever is in Mr. de la Mare's prose, and in his verse an undertone murmurs "whither?" Although no man knows to what end, nor in what unseen company we journey, the poet sees life as a voyage of discovery, calling at every turn of the tide for the

pioneer virtues of courage and loyalty, keen eyes to perceive facts and an honest heart to face them. That reader courts disaster who cuts himself adrift from the sheet-anchor of the normal in his haste to pursue Mr. de la Mare into his faëry-land forlorn, far from "earth's leaden track of day-by-day". For this poet of the moon-lit, shadow-haunted spaces beyond the veil never exalts the world of vision at the expense of the world of actuality. He never says, as many mystics say of the earth, that "we and all things are her dreams". If he is abnormally sensitive to impressions from a world that is "closer than breathing, nearer than hands and feet", yet is unperceived in the bustle of everyday, he is at the same time keenly perceptive of the least of the things of time and space. He is haunted by the transience of all that men love and labor for, but, seeing life as a journey that even death does not end, he is delivered from the fret and hustle that bedevil our best-laid schemes. For life is not a commercial traveler's fevered round from telephone to taxi, from taxi to train, but a journey through eternity in which our reckoning of time is "but as yesterday, and as a watch in the night".

The poetry of *The Veil* and *The Listeners* is often sad, but never restless nor irritable; and the fantasies of *Peacock Pie* did not spring from a sombre mind, nor is the whimsical historian of *The Three Mulla Mulgars* either pessimistic or cynical.

Although Mr. de la Mare passes freely from poetry to prose, the content of his work is singularly homogeneous. His prose fills in the background of his verse; and, except for the habit of inversion which throws the emphasis of a sentence forward or retards it, in the Latin manner, his verse at its most magical is singularly free from poeticisms. No prose tale, for example, could open more straightforwardly than the poem that gives its title to *The Listeners*. "Is there anybody there?" said the traveler, knocking on the moon-lit door. . . ." Such, written continuously as in prose, is the simple and direct approach to a theme that is enveloped in that sense of nearness to the unseen that is Mr. de la Mare's peculiar contribution to contemporary verse. He has written few narrative poems, and the longest of these, *The Three Queer Tales* in *Peacock Pie*, together barely fill a dozen pages. His poetry is almost exclusively lyrical, suggesting its own music, and

reflecting the mood of a moment. In common with most of his contemporaries, he never subjects his verse to the strain of spinning out, developing and fixing the original inspiration which, as Shelley himself noted, is involved in the composition of a long poem. When Mr. de la Mare has occasion to develop a theme, he has recourse to "that other harmony of prose"; and from reading *The Return* or *The Memoirs of a Midget* or the exquisite tale called *The Creatures* we turn again with quickened understanding to his verse.

The theme of *The Return*, introduced in so quiet and natural a manner, is one that few writers could handle without affront to our normal instincts. Arthur Lawford, languid and moody after influenza, falls asleep on a bench in an old country churchyard, beside the grave of one Nicholas Sabatier, a French adventurer who, as the inscription tells, fell by his own hand nearly two centuries ago. In a few moments the incredible thing happens, and is conveyed to the reader, not crudely by way of statement, but by delicate, unemphatic touches that reflect Lawford's changing moods as in a mirror. We are not told in so many words that the Frenchman's spirit, seizing its opportunity, has entered into the sleeper. The immediate effect of this "possession" is to change Lawford's physical aspect. His mentality is not yet affected, except that depression has given way to a vague elation, which he attributes to convalescence. He suspects nothing until in his bedroom at home he is confronted by the strange changed face in the glass. Not until later has he to face and outface "the demands of that other feebly struggling personality which was beginning to insinuate itself into his consciousness, which had so miraculously broken in and taken possession of his body". He retains his personal identity, that indefinable something which compels his wife and friends to acknowledge him in spite of his changed appearance, but he finds that he has slipped through the palisade wrought of circumstance, ambition, duty, with which prudent men fence in their little lives. Cut off in an instant from the crowd from which he had always drawn his sanctions, he discovers—just as Nathaniel Hawthorne imagined his Mr. Wakefield to discover—that by stepping aside for a moment from his place in the world he has lost it for ever. And the story tells how

painfully, yet with what dogged courage, he won back the right to be himself. For *The Return* is a story of action, dramatic in its intensity; it is not a series of impressions of disordered mental states, such as the aftermath of war has forced on the attention of the least curious among us. It tells of swift upheaval and slow adjustment, of conflict between personalities—between Lawford and his wife and her “discreet shocked circle”, between Lawford and the intruder, Sabatier, whose “fearless, packed, daring, fascinating face, with even a spice of genius in it” encountered Lawford’s gaze in the glass. As though to emphasize man’s essential loneliness, Lawford’s wife of twenty years cannot aid him in his strange conflict. The old vicar’s belief in him is his “sheet-anchor right through”; but it is two strangers who help him most by making the issue clear.

“Truth is a wholesome medicine”—there is a hearty Victorian gusto about that sentence which suggests that Mr. de la Mare, pioneer of the Georgians, is not disposed to stop up the old well because he does not admire the design of the drinking-fountain. And if we care to look for them, we shall find that there are not a few points in common between Miss M., the heroine of *The Memoirs of a Midget*, and the heroine of Mr. Lytton Strachey’s contemporary biography of Queen Victoria; for all that the Queen was the very epitome, in her small stately person, of solid English middle-class convention, while Miss M.’s “heart of furious fancies” drove her to seek the divine heritage of freedom in the ring of a traveling circus. Both were brought up in retirement, so closely guarded that they never went downstairs or wandered in the garden alone, except by favor of a servant’s negligence. Both, introduced into society in the eager years of adolescence, threw themselves into the new life with consuming ardor, for a time. “There’s not room enough in me for all that’s there!” exclaimed Miss M. in an ecstasy, and the little Queen thrilled to every hour that unfolded itself in ever new and ravishing experiences. Each small body housed a gallant spirit, singularly sincere, pathetically loyal, game to the last ditch in defense of each one’s “must”. The biographers write with humorous detachment; but whereas Mr. Lytton Strachey sees men and women as essential pygmies, interesting to observe, but deliciously absurd, they are pygmies in Mr.

de la Mare's eyes only relatively to their own boundless hopes, and to the immensities of time and space in the midst of which their little lives are set. "The smallest of bubbles I may be," thought Miss M., "but I reflected the universe." Bright-clad, valiant Miss M. on her little wooden stage may symbolize the greatness of littleness as vividly as the widowed Queen on her throne, hemmed in by duty and caste and prudery and prejudice, may betray the littleness of mortal greatness. And in time Miss M. learned "not to fret so foolishly at being small and insignificant in body; to fear a great deal more remaining pygmy-minded and pygmy-spirited".

Alone in the woods at Wanderslore under the stars, or at dawn "bathed delicately in the eastern sunshine", Miss M. felt "not so ridiculously pygmy either, even in the ladder of the world's proportion—saw-edged blade of grass, gold-cupped moss, starry stonecrop, green musky moschatel, close-packed pebble, wax-winged fly. . . ." The little is not necessarily trivial.

That death prevails over beauty by the mere passage of time is one of the most obvious lessons of life. In that lovely lyric, *The Quiet Enemy*, he writes:

Walk in beauty. Vaunt thy rose.
Flaunt thy transient loveliness.
Pace by pace with thee there goes
A shape that hath not come to bless.

There is no trace of Edgar Allan Poe's horror of "the conqueror worm", nor of his morbid preoccupation with Annabel Lee's sepulchre, or Ulalume's vault. The fact of mortality is accepted as calmly as in Miss Lizette Woodworth Reese's unaccented lines, "The dust blows up and down. . . . Tomorrow so shall I." The bitterness of death consists neither in the corruption of the body nor in dread of the unknown, but in being forgotten. But to die and even to be forgotten is not the end, for the dead, too, have their memories, the theme of so many of Mr. Thomas Hardy's poems. Mr. de la Mare speaks ever and again of unseen presences. I imagine that he would agree with Blake, who believed that ghosts "did not appear much to imaginative men, but only to common minds who did not see the finer spirits". Mr. de la Mare does not

summon hobgoblins nor foul fiends; nor is he greatly concerned with fairies, whom Miss M., indeed, disliked and feared; nor does he aim at forming that atmosphere of apprehension which was essential to the great masters of romance, whose ghosts, as Professor Raleigh has noted, did not come uncalled for. As Poe says of "the nameless elf, . . . no power hath he of evil in himself". In Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* the imps had no power over Laura until she had surrendered to them her desires; in *The Ancient Mariner* the supernatural is the embodiment of an unbodied fear, and in *Macbeth* the evil without is allied with the evil within. In each case the romantic poet is concerned with the effect, the thrill of fear; but Mr. de la Mare treating of the unseen is still a realist, absorbed in scrutiny of the fact.

The presences that he perceives are more often friendless than unfriendly. Sometimes, as so often in Mr. Thomas Hardy's poems, they come seeking us, intent on we know not what mystery, going away grieved if our mood estranges them. Sometimes they dwell on, "in a little green orchard" or "garden all shady". Sometimes a friendless face peers out of the casement of an empty house, or a host of phantom listeners throngs the dark stair. All about us is an unnumbered cloud of witnesses, and who are we that we should deny reality to what the bodily eye cannot see? A little poem in *Peacock Pie* puts arrogant man in his place: All but blind are mole, bat and owl,

And blind as are
These three to me,
So, blind to Some-one
I must be.

Moments of vision come when the questioning heart of man is quieted, "like a sea, silent after a storm that has died". Under the starry darkness of night, or in the still light of the moon, or in the peace of a fire-lit room at dusk, we may "cross the viewless border that divides time from eternity". The mystic seeks silence that he may hear the voice of God, but he knows that quietness of spirit comes not from without, but from within, in freedom from the clamor of desire. Even amid the clatter of the monastery kitchen Brother Lawrence could possess himself of the presence of God. There are secrets that "only the dwellers in the

lonely know", but the poet knows too that mere empty solitude will not bring peace to a divided heart.

For, we are all haunted, not only surrounded, by ghosts. "What are we?" Herbert questions in *The Return*. "So many selves, every man a horde of ghosts." To discuss the problem of personality is not the poet's affair, but always, looking on a man, he sees in him a Self, the child of time, and a Self, the child of eternity. When we are occupied with the interests of every day, one voice speaks; but in solitude or dream another voice is heard. However closely we may hem ourselves round with pomp and friends and all that St. Augustine dismisses as "the trifling occupations that grown-up people call 'business'", a day will come when we shall each one be left alone with the inward presence that slumbers not.

Modern psychology has taught us that we cannot draw a curve round the personal self. "Eternity has in some sort been set in our nature;" and while we exaggerate the importance of our temporal affairs, we at the same time minimize our vital powers. Professor William James declared that we avail ourselves of a very small share of the powers that we actually possess and could use under appropriate conditions; and these we shall learn to master, not by suppressing individuality, but by freeing it from every hindering influence or prejudice or fear. Mere orthodoxy, a flat uniformity, will carry us nowhere; *that* Lawford learnt from Sabatier; and the dreary sheepishness of average humanity, no less than its greed and cruelty, inspired Mr. Anon's bitter indictment when he and Miss M. in the forsaken woods of Wanderslore discussed people of normal size. It is only when something goes askew, so Herbert argued, that we discover to what an extent we are the slaves of mere repetition.

In a recent magazine article on *The Literature of Ecstasy* Mr. Algernon Blackwood suggests that the artist avail himself of two store houses. One of these is stocked with personal memories, which are unpacked only when required, unless deep emotion or fever or dream scatter them in disorder. The other store-house is underground, and in its depths racial, even planetary, memories lie packed away, but are accessible in rare cases to evocation.

There is a wide inward world of life and light and power into

which poet or saint may enter in moments of vision, a world of which music or deep emotion or loveliness may bestow a glimpse. Of Music Mr. de la Mare sings:

When music sounds, all that I was I am
Ere to this haunt of brooding dust I came.

But if these hidden impulses and memories be stirred up aimlessly, in an idle hunt for sensation, or in the spirit of morbid curiosity which betrays the hidden face of fear, we may learn the dreadful-ness of those who said, "My name is Legion, for we are many." To Lawford, whose reveries were "gigantically brooded over by shapes only imagination dimly conceived of: the remote alleys of his mind astir with a ceaseless traffic which it wasn't at least *this* life's business to hearken after, or regard," Sheila and her friends discussing his "case" seemed "like little children with their twigs and pins, fishing for wonders on the brink of the unknown". He had cause to acknowledge the truth of the old vicar's saying: "Once a man strays out of the common herd, he's more likely to meet wolves than angels in the thickets." Infinitely precious to us is the veil!

ALICE LOTHIAN.